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SUBJECT: ARGENTINE PRESIDENT PROPOSES MOVING UP LEGISLATIVE
ELECTIONS BY FOUR MONTHS TO JUNE

11. (SBU) Summary: Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de
Kirchner (CFK) announced March 13 that she will ask Congress
to change the date of this year's national legislative
elections from October 25 to June 28. To do so, Congress
needs to change the election law by March 28. CFK argued
that she wanted to move up the elections so that the country
could address the global economic crisis undistracted by
election politicking. It would be "suicidal," she said, to
keep Argentina in suspense until October. Opposition comment
so far has been largely, but not entirely, negative. End
Summary.

12. (SBU) With former president Nestor Kirchner at her side,
CFK made her announcement in the southern province of Chubut,
one day after Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri said he was
calling city council elections for June 28. CFK used Macri's
announcement as another argument for moving up the national
congressional elections, and she urged provincial governors
to synchronize their local elections with her proposed June
28 date. (In another noteworthy element of her
extemporaneous remarks, CFK once again blamed the "First
World" for the global crisis that threatened to victimize
Argentina and undo much of the economic progress that
Argentina had made since its 2001-02 crisis.)

13. (SBU) Argentine electoral law currently stipulates that
elections will be held the fourth Sunday of October (which
this year would be October 25). Experts interviewed on
television said that changing the election date would require
the approval of an absolute majority in Congress (or 129
votes in the Chamber of Deputies and 37 in the Senate). The
electoral law also requires that elections be convoked with
90 days' advance notice. That means that, for elections to
be held June 28, the legislative fix would need to be
completed no later than March 30.

14. (U) The opposition's initial reaction was negative, but
not uniformly so. Margarita Stolbizer of the Civic Coalition
(CC) and Senator Gerardo Morales of the Radical Party (UCR)
appeared side by side on television to denounce the Kirchner
move as harmful to the country's institutionalism. They
rejected CFK's use of the global crisis as a justification
for "breaking the rules," and asserted that clear rules are
central to a democracy. Stolbizer criticized CFK's failure
to consult the opposition before making her decision and
announcing it, and Morales said it was another example of the
Kirchners' penchant for controversy and conflict rather than
consensus. Morales said the surprise announcement was a sign
of Kirchner desperation, and that Nestor Kirchner "had lost
his mind" due to his defeat in Catamarca's March 8 provincial
elections. The initial reaction by the other significant
vector of the opposition, the "dissident Peronists," was more
muted, with Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri and
congressional deputy Francisco de Narvaez indicating they did
not agree with moving up the elections but were prepared to
go along with it if approved by Congress.

Comment

15. (SBU) As post has noted before, the Kirchners love to make surprise announcements. They succeeded in catching most everyone off guard with this one: there were no advance leaks or rumors of the move, and our hunch is that they saw an opening in Mayor Macri's March 12 announcement of city council elections on June 28 and made their own decision in less than 24 hours. The Kirchners are likely seeking to shift tables on the opposition and disrupt or short-circuit any gathering momentum for opposition leaders in the wake of Nestor Kirchner's setback in the province of Catamarca (see Buenos Aires 0255). The opposition's diverging reactions remind one of how divided it is. The instantaneous interpretation of some embassy contacts is that the Kirchners decided to move up the elections because trend lines in the polls indicate that their public support will only decline with time as the Argentine economy deteriorates through the course of the year. The change in election date needs to be approved by Congress, however. It is very much an open question as to whether the Kirchner administration has the votes to prevail.

WAYNE